

Ministry of Health

# COVID-19 Vaccination: Special Populations

## Vaccination in Pregnancy & Breastfeeding Patient Decision-Making Tool

Version 2.0- June 22, 2021

This guidance document is not intended to provide medical advice, diagnosis or treatment, or legal advice.

- Please check the Ministry of Health (MOH) [COVID-19](#) website regularly for updates to this document, mental health resources, and other information.

**This is an information tool that can be used by patients to help them make an informed decision about the COVID-19 vaccination during pregnancy and breastfeeding.**

# I am pregnant or breastfeeding. Should I get the COVID-19 Vaccine?

It is **YOUR** choice.

For many people, getting a COVID-19 vaccine is the safest choice.

Pregnant and breastfeeding people were not included in initial clinical trials of these vaccines. However, we now have more than a year of experience showing outcomes of these people and their babies. The information below will help you make an informed choice about if you should get the COVID-19 vaccine.

## YOUR OPTIONS

1



Get a COVID-19 vaccine as soon as it is available to you.

2



Wait until there is more information about the vaccines in pregnancy and breastfeeding.

3



Wait until your pregnancy and/or breastfeeding is complete.

## What are the benefits of getting the COVID-19 vaccine?

### COVID-19 vaccines are very effective in protecting you from severe illness.

- People who received the COVID-19 vaccines were less likely to become ill with COVID-19 and were well protected against severe disease and death.<sup>1</sup> It is still possible to get and transmit COVID-19 after a vaccine.<sup>2</sup>
- If the number of COVID-19 cases in your community goes up, your risk of getting COVID-19 goes up.
- COVID-19 vaccines work by giving our body something that looks like the virus. This teaches our immune system to recognize and fight the virus if we come into contact with it later.<sup>1,3</sup>
- Even if you already had a COVID-19 infection and recovered, you could get infected again.<sup>4</sup> Vaccination is recommended to provide long-term protection.

### There is growing evidence about the safety of COVID-19 vaccines in pregnancy.

- These vaccines do not contain live virus.<sup>1</sup>
- Many other vaccines are routinely given in pregnancy and are safe. For example, whooping cough and flu vaccines are offered during pregnancy, with no bad outcomes reported. Vaccines are a standard of care in Canada, providing the parent and baby with protection against infectious diseases.<sup>5</sup>
- While pregnant people were not included in the original studies, many have now received the vaccine without evidence of harm.<sup>6</sup>
- The antibodies that a pregnant individual makes from the vaccine likely pass to the baby and may help keep the baby safe after birth.<sup>7</sup>

### Getting the vaccine can help prevent complications or bad outcomes for parent and baby.

- Like everyone else, most pregnant people have mild COVID-19. However, pregnant people are at an increased risk of severe illness requiring hospital care and admission to the intensive care unit compared to those who are not pregnant.<sup>3, 8-11</sup>
- Giving birth too early in pregnancy (preterm birth), having a caesarean delivery, and having a baby admitted into neonatal intensive care unit is more common in pregnant people with severe COVID-19.<sup>8, 9, 11</sup>

## What are the risks of getting the COVID-19 vaccine?

### Clinical trials for COVID-19 vaccines did not include pregnant people.

- These vaccines were tested in a large group of people (over 40,000). A few people got pregnant during the vaccine trials. So far, the results are similar to people who got a placebo (no vaccine) and got pregnant.
- The mRNA vaccines are not likely to have increased risks for pregnant people, such as pregnancy loss or development issues. Current data collected on 35,000 pregnant people who received the vaccine show no negative effects on female reproduction or the baby's development in pregnancy.<sup>12</sup>
- Based on what we know about how COVID-19 vaccines work, there is no theoretical reason to believe the vaccines would be unsafe or less safe during pregnancy.<sup>13</sup>
- As with any vaccine, allergic reactions, including anaphylaxis, are rare but can occur. Talk to your health care provider if you have allergies to medications.

### Anyone getting the vaccine may have some side effects.<sup>2,4</sup>

- As with other vaccines, some people may develop mild side effects in the days after immunization. This is caused by the immune system's normal response to the vaccine. These side effects are generally not serious and go away on their own.<sup>1,4</sup>
- Talk to your doctor or midwife if you develop a fever, or any side effects that worry you or that last more than 3 days, so they can give you advice.
- Very rare cases of serious blood clots have been reported following vaccination with viral vector COVID-19 vaccines (AstraZeneca and Janssen). See the National Advisory Committee on Immunization's [Recommendations on the use of COVID-19 Vaccines](#) for details and symptoms.<sup>14</sup>

#### Common Side Effects

(may affect more than 1 in 10 people)



- Pain at injection site
- Headache
- Chills
- Muscle Pain
- Joint pain
- Fever

#### Uncommon Side Effects

(may affect up to 1 in 100 people)



- Enlarged lymph nodes (Pfizer and AstraZeneca)
- Fever (Moderna)

Additional information on side effects available [online here](#).

## What do the experts recommend?

The *National Advisory Committee on Immunization* preferentially recommends that a complete two-dose vaccine series with an mRNA COVID-19 vaccine (Pfizer and Moderna) should be offered to pregnant or breastfeeding people. In early clinical trials, pregnant and breastfeeding people were excluded from or represented by small numbers of participants. Additional evidence is now available from real world use of COVID-19 vaccines, primarily mRNA vaccines, showing that COVID-19 vaccines are safe in these populations.<sup>11</sup> See the NACI [recommendations for interchangeability of authorized COVID-19 vaccines](#) in a vaccine series when the first dose is mRNA COVID-19 vaccine or AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine.<sup>20</sup>

The *Ontario Society of Obstetricians & Gynaecologists* and *The Society of Obstetricians and Gynecologists of Canada (SOGC)*, state that all pregnant women in Canada should be offered a COVID-19 vaccination at any time during their pregnancy if they are eligible and no contradictions exist. The SOGC supports the use of all available COVID-19 vaccines approved in Canada in any trimester of pregnancy and during breastfeeding in accordance with regional eligibility. The decision should be based on the women's personal values and an understanding that the risk of infection and/or illness from COVID-19 outweighs the theorized risk of being vaccinated in pregnancy.<sup>9,11</sup>

The Ontario immunization strategy has included pregnant people in highest risk health condition category of the Phase 2 prioritization in the vaccine roll out because of their increased risk of severe illness. This means all pregnant people are currently eligible to receive the mRNA vaccine to help reduce their risk of severe illness from COVID-19.

Speak to your doctor or midwife to learn if the benefits of getting the vaccine outweigh the risks. If you decide to get the COVID-19 vaccine, it is recommended to wait two weeks before or after other vaccines.<sup>1</sup>

## What else should I think about to help me decide?

1

Make sure you understand as much as you can about COVID-19 and the vaccine.

2

### Think about your own personal risk.

Look at the columns below and think about your risk of getting COVID-19 and having severe illness from COVID-19. Think about your safety and if you are able to stay safe. Would getting the vaccine help you stay safer?



### The risk of getting COVID-19 is higher if:

- You live in a community with a lot of COVID-19 cases
- You have regular contact with people outside your home
- You live in a crowded housing situation (such as a shelter)
- You, or a member of your household work in a high-risk environment (for example, you are a front-line essential worker or health-care worker).

### The risk of developing severe illness from COVID-19 in pregnancy is higher if:

- You have medical problems such as pre-pregnancy diabetes, pre-pregnancy high blood pressure, a compromised immune system, kidney disease, liver disease, heart disease or asthma
- You are overweight
- You are a smoker
- You are 35 years of age or older
- You are in the last three months (third trimester) of your pregnancy



If you are at a higher risk of getting COVID-19, it may make sense to get the vaccine. The risk of getting COVID-19 is likely higher than the risk of the vaccine<sup>10, 15, 16</sup>

### If you are not at higher risk for COVID-19 and:

- You are able to wear a mask
- Getting the vaccine will make you nervous (you are more worried about the risks of getting the vaccine than about getting COVID-19)
- Your community does NOT have a lot of COVID-19 cases
- You and the people you live with can physically distance from others



It may make sense for you to wait for more information or talk to your doctor or midwife.

## What about breastfeeding?

Clinical trials for the vaccine did not include people who were breastfeeding. Even though there is no data about safety in breastfeeding, Canadian experts believe that because the vaccines do not contain live virus, it is likely safe to breastfeed babies.<sup>9, 15</sup> Antibodies have been shown to pass in the breast milk but we do not yet know how much this will protect your baby.<sup>17</sup>

## What if I get pregnant after getting the vaccine?



If you are pregnant or become pregnant soon after getting the first dose of the vaccine you will still be offered a second dose. The decision of whether to get the second dose should be made by looking at the risks of not being completely vaccinated during pregnancy vs. the risks of receiving the vaccine during pregnancy.<sup>9</sup>

## What if I am planning a pregnancy?

The Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada recommends that people who are planning on becoming pregnant get both doses of the vaccine ahead of pregnancy (where possible). It is not known if a person should delay getting pregnant after getting the vaccine. There is no evidence to suggest that the COVID-19 vaccine causes fertility issues.<sup>18</sup> Talk to a health care provider about the risks and benefits of getting the vaccine if you are planning a pregnancy.

## Summary

Getting a COVID-19 vaccine during pregnancy is your choice.

COVID-19 may cause more severe illness in pregnant people than in people of the same age who are not pregnant.

The COVID-19 vaccine protects against infection and severe illness from COVID-19.

You should consider your own personal risks vs. benefits of getting the COVID-19 vaccine.

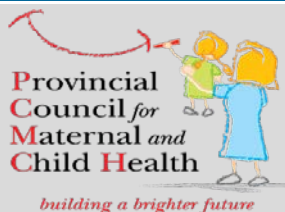


## Do you have more questions?

**Speak to your doctor or midwife for more information.**

## Your feedback is important to us!

Please complete [a survey online](#) or by scanning the QR code.



*This information sheet provides basic information only. It is not intended to provide or take the place of medical advice, diagnosis or treatment.*

**For more information on the intended use of this resource and references, please go to [www.PCMCH.on.ca/COVID-19Vaccine](http://www.PCMCH.on.ca/COVID-19Vaccine)**

## References

1. Ministry of Health. COVID-19 Vaccine Information Sheet. Updated April 1, 2021. Available at [http://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/pro/programs/publichealth/coronavirus/docs/vaccine/COVID-19\\_information\\_sheet\\_pfizer-biontech.pdf](http://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/pro/programs/publichealth/coronavirus/docs/vaccine/COVID-19_information_sheet_pfizer-biontech.pdf).
2. Ministry of Health. What you should know about the COVID-19 vaccines (January 29th, 2021). <https://files.ontario.ca/moh-covid-19-vaccines-fact-sheet-en-2021-02-05.pdf>
3. Ministry of Health. About COVID-19 vaccines. Released on March 11, 2021. Available at: [https://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/pro/programs/publichealth/coronavirus/docs/vaccine/COVID-19\\_about\\_vaccines.pdf](https://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/pro/programs/publichealth/coronavirus/docs/vaccine/COVID-19_about_vaccines.pdf)
4. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Frequently asked questions about COVID-19 Vaccination. Available at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/faq.html>
5. CIG Part 3: Vaccination of Specific Populations Immunization in pregnancy and breastfeeding: Canadian Immunization Guide. Retrieved from: [Immunization in pregnancy and breastfeeding: Canadian Immunization Guide - Canada.ca](https://www.immunization.gc.ca/canadian-immunization-guide-part-3)
6. Shimabukuro, T.T., Kin, S. Y., Myers, T.R. et al. (April 21, 2021). Preliminary Findings of mRNA Covid-19 Vaccine Safety in Pregnant Persons. NEJM. DOI: 10.1056/NEJMoa2104983. Available at <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMoa2104983>
7. Gray, K. J., Bordt, E. A., Atyeo, C. et al. COVID-19 vaccine response in pregnant and lactating women: a cohort study. AJOG: March 25, 2021; Available at [https://www.ajog.org/article/S0002-9378\(21\)00187-3/fulltext](https://www.ajog.org/article/S0002-9378(21)00187-3/fulltext)
8. Money, D. Canadian surveillance of COVID-19 in pregnancy: Epidemiology, maternal and infant outcomes. Report #3: Released February 25 2021. Available at <https://ridprogram.med.ubc.ca/cancovid-preg/>.
9. Society of Obstetrician's and Gynaecologists of Canada (December 18, 2020, Reaffirmed May 4, 2021). SOGC Statement on COVID-19 Vaccination in Pregnancy. Retrieved from: [SOGC Statement on COVID-19 Vaccination in Pregnancy](https://www.sogc.org/en/content/featurednews/SOGC_statement_on_COVID-19_vaccination_in_pregnancy)
10. Zambrano LD, Ellington S, Strid P, et al. Update: Characteristics of symptomatic women of reproductive age with laboratory-confirmed SARS-CoV-2 infection by pregnancy status - United States, January 22- October 3, 2020. MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep. 2020; 69: 1641-7. Available at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/33151921>.
11. Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada (April 15, 2021) SOGC Statement regarding pregnant woman with COVID-19 in ICUs in Ontario. [https://www.sogc.org/en/content/featurednews/SOGC\\_statement\\_regarding\\_pregnant\\_woman\\_with\\_COVID-19\\_in\\_ICUs\\_in\\_Ontario.aspx](https://www.sogc.org/en/content/featurednews/SOGC_statement_regarding_pregnant_woman_with_COVID-19_in_ICUs_in_Ontario.aspx)
12. Shimabukuro, T.T., Kin, S. Y., Myers, T.R. et al. (April 21, 2021). Preliminary Findings of mRNA Covid-19 Vaccine Safety in Pregnant Persons. NEJM. DOI: 10.1056/NEJMoa2104983. Available at <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMoa2104983>
13. Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada (SOGC). SOGC Statement on the COVID-19 vaccines and rare adverse outcomes of thrombosis associated with low platelets. Released April 20, 2021. Available at: [https://www.sogc.org/en/content/featured-news/SOGC\\_statement\\_on\\_the\\_COVID-19\\_vaccines\\_and\\_rare\\_adverse\\_outcomes\\_of\\_thrombosis.aspx](https://www.sogc.org/en/content/featured-news/SOGC_statement_on_the_COVID-19_vaccines_and_rare_adverse_outcomes_of_thrombosis.aspx)
14. National Advisory Committee on Immunization.(Updated May 28, 2021) Recommendations on the use of COVID-19 vaccines. Retrieved from: <https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/phac-aspc/documents/services/immunization/national-advisory-committee-on-immunization-naci/recommendations-use-covid-19-vaccines/recommendations-use-covid-19-vaccines-en.pdf>

15. Allotey J, Stallings E, Bonet M, et al. Clinical manifestations, risk factors, and maternal and perinatal outcomes of coronavirus disease 2019 in pregnancy: Living systematic review and meta-analysis. *BMJ*. 2020; 370: m3320. Available at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/32873575>.
16. Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR), Birth and Infant Outcomes Following Laboratory-Confirmed SARS-CoV-2 Infection in Pregnancy — SET-NET, 16 Jurisdictions, March 29–October 14, 2020 Retrieved from: <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6944e2.htm>
17. Gray, K. J., Bordt, E. A., Atyeo, C. et al. COVID-19 vaccine response in pregnant and lactating women: a cohort study. *AJOG*: March 25, 2021; Available at [https://www.ajog.org/article/S0002-9378\(21\)00187-3/fulltext](https://www.ajog.org/article/S0002-9378(21)00187-3/fulltext)
18. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Information about COVID-19 Vaccines for People who are Pregnant or Breastfeeding. Updated March 18, 2021. Available at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/recommendations/pregnancy.html>